



About four hours into a trip to Molokai and Maui, the Charisma began to take on water and within minutes had capsized in the middle of the Molokai Channel. Cmdr. Shema and crew were shocked to discover that the boat's keel was missing. The family spent an anxious hour and a half in the water as they awaited Coast Guard rescue. The Charisma was never found.

RESCUE AT SEA

A trip to Molokai turns into a trip of the unexpected for two boaters and their dog

Story by Karen S. Spangler • Photos by Cmdr. Rick Shema

YOU can be an experienced Sailor with an abundance of knowledge about boating, follow all of the safety guidelines, be prepared for anything, heed weather advisories and do everything right - and still find yourself in trouble in the middle of the ocean.

Cmdr. Rick Shema knows all too well that even if you do everything exactly right, a lot can still go wrong. One minute, he was sailing through the Molokai Channel headed for the island of Molokai and a few minutes later, he and his wife Tamlyn and the family pet, a four-year old border collie named Scottie, were treading water.

Scottie has been sailing with the family since puppyhood and loves to stand at the weather rail, tethered and wearing a life jacket, as he chases and bites at the waves.

"That day, he was very anxious and sensed something was wrong," said Shema.

On the day of the mishap at sea, Cmdr. Shema and crew left Kaneohe on his boat the Charisma, bound for Molokai and then Lahaina, Maui for the annual Labor Day Lahaina Return Race. But four hours into the trip - at a point about 10 miles into the Molokai Channel and halfway between Oahu and Molokai - disaster struck.

The Charisma began to take on water at a fast rate. Unable to determine where the water was entering and helpless to stop it, it quickly became evident that they were going to have to "abandon ship."

Shema had only a couple minutes to make a mayday call to the U.S. Coast Guard and broadcast his position, then pull out some safety equipment before his hasty exit from the boat.

The family watched in dismay as the Charisma capsized, then were incredulous as they realized the problem - the keel of the boat was missing. Managing to pull some lifejackets out of the boat, they put them on in the water.

"We were constantly reacting to whatever was happening next," Cmdr. Shema narrated.

They held onto a floating bag (an uninflated dinghy), one of the few things that he was able to retrieve from the capsized boat. He explained that it was an important item to have because he knew it would float and thought perhaps there might be some chance of inflating it.

There were some anxious moments as they bobbed in the waves

and waited for a Coast Guard rescue.

"The Coast Guard knew we were in trouble and had our position," Shema related. "But when we were in the water, I was concerned about sharks - which have been known to come around within the hour. They sense fear," he added.

But when the Coast Guard finally did appear, the possibility of rescue looked dubious.

"When the Coast Guard helicopter came over, they didn't see us. They sped off out of sight. They came around a second time and sped out of sight again. I started lighting off flares, but they were nighttime flares and not very effective," he continued.

"Why is this happening? What's going to happen next? At this point, we were helpless and had no control of the situation."

But still undaunted, Shema reasoned, "It was getting to be late in the afternoon and I thought that we might have to spend the night out there. I would have tried to get back to the hull of the boat and inflate the dinghy. We had oars to steer downwind and eventually land at Oahu."

Although the boat's captain was prepared to wait out a rescue for as long as three hours, he stated that they were actually only in the water about half that time.

Soon the high-pitched whine of helicopter engines and rotor blades heralded the third approach of the H-65 helicopter. This time, the helicopter aircrew saw the boat's crew as they waved their arms frantically and lit off the one remaining flare. A basket was lowered to the water and Shema, his wife and Scottie were hoisted skyward to safety.

Shema praised the efforts of the Coast Guard and the quick rescue. "I attribute that to the professionalism of the Coast Guard. They did everything correctly - coordinating search efforts, etc. They went all out and did a great job," he commented.

Shema also attributed also some of the success of his rescue to safety preparations. He stressed that boaters should have both a VHF radio and an emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB).

"You need both because they serve different functions," he said. He also strongly advised against totally relying on other less dependable means of communication, such as cell phones and CB radios.

Shema later launched an intensive three-day search for the Charisma with surface vessels, a salvage company and even chartered an airplane to look for the

missing vessel. Perhaps the boat eventually sank or drifted out into the ocean, but it was never found.

Less than a year later, at the helm of a 36-foot sloop Heatwave, Shema sailed across the Pacific. Did he have any fears?

"I still have some anxious feelings at times, but it makes me more prepared and aware because I know things can happen," he admitted. "Even as prepared as the boat was and I was, we still had life-threatening problems," he added.

Shema also sailed in the Pacific Cup Yacht Race 2000 in July, winning third place out of 12 boats in Division C and placing 22nd out of 80 boats in the overall race. The Pacific Cup race, from San Francisco to Kaneohe, took 14 days and 21 hours. Next year, he plans to race locally as well as cruise around the Hawaiian Islands.

He offered sage advice to would-be boaters, "Be self-reliant. You have to be able to take care of yourself."

"You have to be ready to handle any situation, such as hitting objects and tearing a hole in the boat and causing catastrophic flooding, a man overboard, fires, any kind of emergency situation," he advised.

Shema, a 22-year Navy veteran, is assigned as a staff oceanographer for Commander, Patrol and Reconnaissance Force Pacific (PATRECFORPAC) Weather at Marine Corps Base - Kaneohe.

The unit was formerly based at Barbers Point Naval Air Station. His responsibilities include advising wing units and ensuring that aircrews have the capability to understand the environment in order to place weapons and sensors.

Known to some as "the weather guy", he started a website in 1997 as a place for boat racers to go for weather forecasts.

The site includes weather information for boaters, the story of Shema's sea rescue, lessons learned and information about races as well as links to other sites. It can be accessed at: www.weatherguy.com.

But most importantly, Shema wants other boaters to know the importance of being informed and being prepared when sailing the ocean blue.

He emphasized some important rules of boating safety: "properly equipping your boat with the proper safety equipment and communication equipment, knowing how to use it and making sure the crew knows how to use it."

"Drilling and practicing is important and practicing at pierside, along with understanding the prob-



Cmdr. Rick Shema, his wife Tamlyn, and Scottie, the family's four-year-old border collie, enjoy sailing on the Heatwave. Shema won third place in Division C of the Pacific Cup Yacht Race 2000 in his new sloop. It replaces the Charisma that was lost at sea.



The Charisma is shown sailing the waters of Pearl Harbor with the Arizona Memorial in the background. Later, the Charisma capsized in the Molokai Channel and was never found.

lem," he said.

A Hawaii resident since 1993, Cmdr. Shema has been boating since he was a teenager.

"Of all the people I've known, I'm one of the most 'be prepared kind of guys'," he admitted with a grin. "It's hard enough if you are prepared so why cut yourself short before you even leave the dock?" he remarked.

On a somewhat light, yet helpful note, he offered a couple tips, "The

U.S. Coast Guard does not conduct salvage operations," he commented. But a cardinal rule after the rescue, according to the avid sailor, is to "thank the Coast Guard who saved your butt."

Probably the most important thing to keep in mind, though, are these bottom line words of wisdom offered by Shema, "When you're out on there on the water, you can't just walk home."